MANAGED CARE: A SLIPPERY SLOPE?

The Academy of Family Practice has as one of its main concerns the standard of care that is available to the whole population of South Africa.

If your understanding of good practice is merely the amount of money you make, don't bother to read on.

There is no way in which we can practice a high standard of care without adequate management. To date much of the managing has come from within the professionals, from our personal and professional ethics and discipline. We have been brought up in a society where it was accepted that you wake up at night when called by a patient, that you remain available for your patients and that fraud is unacceptable.

As soon as the management from within diminishes the management from without has to take up the slack if we are to avoid the total collapse of the health care system. This applies equally to the systems of the state and the private sector. The chief temptation of the fee for service sector is to overservice. The chief temptation of managed care is to underservice. The public sector has the same temptation to underserve.

Both the private and public sectors have enough people in the system today who do not have the self discipline that will allow our country to have affordable health care. The public sector has become non-functional with its non-system of yesteryear. The private sector is incapable of sustaining its viability. Both systems can only be salvaged on behalf of the survival of the patient with increased management from the outside of the professional. If we can get back to a way of conducting ourselves in such a manner that the patient gets affordable care of quality then we will again be acting in our own best interests as professionals.

Managed care and HMOs is just one of the ways of trying to salvage the situation we are in. It is quite capable of both decreasing and increasing the standards of medicine we practice. Our protection lies in setting up systems where the self-interest of patients, health workers and payers are fairly balanced against one another so that real negotiations can take place between equals. The middlemen between these parties sucking off profit without adding much value, should be as few as possible.